

As any college-bound student and his or her family know, April can be an extremely nerve-wracking month. High school seniors are expected to complete their final semesters, juggle writing final papers and scholarship essays, and make decisions about college and career plans.

In early May, students must be prepared to inform each school to which they applied whether they accept or reject its admission offers, sometimes with only weeks to weigh the various financial aid packages. It can be an arduous and stressful time of life, but there are many resources and avenues of help available to students and their families.

The initial price tag of a college education is daunting for any family. Tuition plus room and board at an American college or university can cost as much as \$53,000 each year. Fortunately, the cost of a college education in Nebraska may be one third of that. You may be interested to know, however, that Federal student aid programs offer sources of significant assistance. Support is available to college students nationwide in the form of grants, loans, or work-study assistance for all need-based applicants. A student's eligibility for such federal education assistance is determined from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which applicants promptly submit to the institutions at which they apply. School, state, and private aid financial aid deadlines vary, so applicants should make sure to submit the FAFSA as close to January 1, the first day to file, as possible.

One of the most popular forms of assistance is the Pell Grant, a need-based federal education grant that is often the focal point of a school's financial aid package. The Pell Grant is the largest federal financial aid award determined by the FAFSA, to which other federal or nonfederal aid may be added. For your information, the current maximum Pell Grant for the 2009-10 award year (July 1, 2009 to June 30, 2010) is \$5,350.

Aside from federal grants like the Pell award, financial aid is also available through a student's college or university, as well as through countless generous private scholarship funds. Colleges and universities devote a substantial amount of their endowments toward student financial aid and have financial aid counselors on staff to help admitted students and their parents put together the best financial aid package. High school guidance counselors are also invaluable resources for many local and state scholarship opportunities, and can direct students toward other clearinghouses of private scholarship information.

Many private scholarships are targeted toward students who live in a particular area, graduate from a certain high school, plan to study a specific area of interest, excel at a particular sport or activity, or who belong (or whose parents belong) to a particular organization. These scholarship opportunities are numerous, and many scholarships actually go unclaimed each year. For help with your college scholarship search, be sure to visit <http://college.gov>, the College Board, and other scholarship search engines online—but remember to avoid giving out personal information on suspicious sites and do not pay for free information.

For more information on paying for college, be sure to visit my website, fortenberry.house.gov.

As difficult as the college selection process can be, higher education can be a rewarding experience and provide an abundance of opportunities for determined and hard-working students. Financial aid can increase affordable access to these opportunities for all students, and it is my hope that resources such as those mentioned may aid in broadening horizons for all who have the desire to continue their education. Congratulations to the class of 2009, and best of luck to you all, whatever your plans may be.